

**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

# Critical Theory, colonialism, and the historicity of thought

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*There is ... the possibility that the copy (i.e., a second work, as opposed to a first) will turn out to be superior, thus relativizing the notion of original, taking from it its mythical dignity and challenging the preconception—basic to the colonial inferiority complex—at the heart of such mythologies.*

—Roberto Schwarz, “National Adequation, and Critical Originality” (1991)

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Recent work within the tradition of Critical Theory has at last begun to interpret critically the historical and colonial sedimentations frequently found in the concepts and categories of Western political thought.<sup>1</sup> The foundational salvo came with the publication of Susan Buck-Morss's seminal essay, “Hegel and Haiti” (2002), a bravura achievement that probed the silenced history of slavery as a root metaphor of western political thought, with particular emphasis on its structuring role in the architecture of Hegel's philosophy, especially his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In doing so, she staged an undisciplined yet rigorous historical narrative. Buck-Morss' initial essay and subsequent book, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (2009), were forged through interdisciplinary engagements that, among other things, encompassed the broad parameters of postcolonial criticism. The upshot: both a critical dislodgement of Hegel's thought from his own Eurocentric conceits and a denunciation of the ways in which interpreters of Hegel have silenced the possible transatlantic dimensions of his philosophy. But Buck-Morss did not just open the possibility of a different interpretation of Hegel. She similarly defended the critical import of undisciplined histories along with the possibility of a critical recasting of the idea of universal history.<sup>2</sup> But with very few exceptions Buck-Morss's call for the retrieval of universal history went unheeded, as did her tacit plea for drawing from the dialectical legacy of Critical Theory in order to explore the historicity of western political thought in relation to colonial and postcolonial situations.

Other Critical Theory scholars have included some of the questions and problems associated with imperialism, racism and colonialism in their reflections—say, Eduardo Mendieta's (2007) signature combination of Habermasian Critical Theory and the philosophy of liberation and Thomas McCarthy's (2009) critique and reconstruction of development, but the most substantial recent intervention is Amy Allen's (2015) widely discussed book, *The End of Progress*, which has called for a decolonization of the normative foundations of critical theory, robustly reset the terms of the debate.<sup>3</sup> Yet the engagement between Critical Theory and theoretical traditions of postcolonial and decolonial thought has mostly been one-dimensional. Critical engagements like Allen's have brought insights from postcolonial theory to bear on the concepts, categories and narratives of Critical Theory, but no sustained effort has been made to

probe critically the theoretical forms associated with the postcolonial and decolonial critiques, the historical accounts on which these are premised, and how the historicity of thought is assumed in these bodies of work.

It is in that spirit that this article proposes to bring the dialectical legacy of Critical Theory to bear on some of the axiomatic claims found among postcolonial and decolonial theories. For this legacy consists of a dialectical account of the historicity of political thought that openly calls these axioms into question and formulates theoretical forms that are more adept at grasping the historical sedimentations and contradictions defining colonial and postcolonial situations and their corollary predicaments of power.<sup>4</sup> The present article is thus a continuation of an earlier effort to make good this contention (Vázquez-Arroyo, 2008).<sup>5</sup> It not only presents a reflection on postcolonial situations and their concomitant predicaments of power from the perspective of a reworked version of this legacy, as formulated by dialectical critical theorists Theodor W. Adorno and Roberto Schwarz. It also defends this legacy's central import for any genuinely critical conceptualization of colonial and postcolonial situations, as opposed to mainstream postcolonial theory and decolonial forms of thought.

Pursuing this argument demands critical reflection at five different levels: critical examination of the decolonizing motif as it relates to discourses and bodies of work; a critique of the rather indiscriminate critique of Eurocentricism, and a more sober formulation of this critique; an elucidation of the ways in which postcolonial and decolonial discourses thematize colonialism and impose a rather reductive and politically disabling catechism, which constitutes a regression in terms of how colonialism has been conceptualized. The fourth is how decolonial accounts fundamentally misrecognize and distort the historicity of thought; and the fifth is a sketch of a dialectical account of the historicity of thought that can adequately account for historical sedimentations, the genesis and validity of concepts, and pursue a more critical formulation of originality.

## 2 | EPISTEMOLOGICAL DECOLONIZATION?

Enrique Dussel has formulated the most significant engagement with Critical Theory from the perspective of his decolonial philosophy of liberation (2015, see also Dussel, 1998, pp. 326–341; 2016, pp. 121–123). Roughly speaking, Dussel's (2013) version of epistemological decolonization consists of four core tenets: first, to take critical notice, from the perspective of the postcolonial world, not just of Eurocentrism as a locus of enunciation but also as a habitus that deeply penetrates both the subjectivity of thinkers and the objectivity of the theories these formulate. Second, to call into question the universal claims of European thought and, similarly, the imitation of these thought forms. Third, to debunk “developmental fallacies” inscribed in European thought that at once misrecognize and universalize European paths of development; and, fourth, to formulate knowledge from the peripheries, not the metropolitan centers (like most decolonial thinkers, he takes for granted Immanuel Wallerstein's world systems theory), and thus invert the terms of capitalist modernity.

Central to Dussel's criticism of the Frankfurt School is, accordingly, its failure to explicitly thematize, let alone conceptualize, colonialism, which he traces to a Eurocentric outlook that consists in never thinking beyond the North Atlantic fold.<sup>6</sup> But his most substantial criticism consists of how, in his view, Frankfurt School Critical Theory retained an ontological concept of totality that his philosophy of liberation has overcome. In such overcoming, Levinas is a central figure, although a Levinas recast to Dussel's specifications. Rather than a theologically infused hypostatization of the Other, his Levinas formulates a differentiated and materialist primacy of the Other, along with a historically concretized account of exteriority as exclusion.<sup>7</sup> In Dussel's original if highly unstable synthesis, Levinas meets Marx: if Levinas's account of the Other privileges a condition of shared vulnerability, Marx adduced the necessary conceptual and historical mediations and differentiations on the basis of which Dussel has forged an ethic of liberation, an achievement that, in his view, grants his philosophy an advantage over a tradition of critical theorizing sorely lacking one (2015, pp. 55–56).<sup>8</sup> By recasting exteriority as exclusion, Dussel formulates one of the most compelling attribute of his philosophy of liberation, one that amply echoes the early Marx's brief for the proletariat: *qua exterior*, the excluded not only challenge reigning hegemonies and delegitimize the status quo, but through discursive practices create a new consensus leading to the progressive creation of a new legitimacy (2015, p. 63).<sup>9</sup>

It is from the centrality he accords to discursive rationality that Dussel redeems the legacy of the second generation of the Frankfurt School. Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas, Dussel argues, righted the solipsism of the epistemology of consciousness crippling the first generation of Critical Theory by arguing for communicative rationality, effectively dislodging the philosophy of the subject and inscribing discourse at the center of Critical Theory. Even so, Dussel goes on to argue, there is something regressive in the second generation's upending of a central concern of Adorno and Horkheimer's: the materialist negativity of the first generation, its negative critique.

Dussel thus sums up his reconstructive engagement with Critical Theory by retrieving the materialism and negative dialectical criticism of the first generation, and the emphasis on discourse and intersubjective community of the second generation (2015, p. 65). But he is quite emphatic about the need to go beyond—“*más allá (jenseits)*,” he writes—both generations of Critical Theory by way of a philosophy of liberation encompassing and re-cognizing exteriority qua exclusion, and recasting critical discourse rationality in terms of a negative-materialist-communitarian consensus from the exteriority/exclusion of victims (Dussel, 2015, pp. 68–69).

By any measure, Dussel's is a serious engagement with Critical Theory from the perspective of a philosophical tradition for which the experience of colonialism, and its legacies, is a central one. Still: how compelling is his critique? That colonialism is never thematized, or that the North Atlantic world is the main political and cultural point of reference for three generations of Frankfurt School critical theorists, is clear enough. Even so, as is often the case in critics of Critical Theory's Eurocentrism, Dussel overshoots his target.<sup>10</sup> If colonialism never figures centrally in any of the three generations of Frankfurt School Critical Theory that he identifies, the pieties and idealizations about Europe and the USA found in Habermas have no counterpart in Adorno, nor does the teleology of progress built into the architecture of Habermas' writings (Vázquez-Arroyo, 2013).

There is, however, a moment of truth in Dussel's critique, even if making good on it requires going in a different direction from the one he chooses. For it is one thing to criticize the Eurocentric habits of thought found in the historical accounts, or sense of the present, that a thinker offers—and here Habermas, who has delved deeper into the European historical record than any other Frankfurt critical theorist, is liable to be the most vulnerable—and the silences and disavowals involved. But to trace the forms of experience and historical sediments found in thought forms is a different critical endeavor altogether.

Stated somewhat differently: it is one thing to trace, identify, and criticize exclusions and silences at the level of historical narratives and cultural references; but when these exclusions are elevated to an epistemological level—thus denying any modicum of autonomy to thought, and conflating philosophical with political and sociological concepts—the results are ultimately tendentious, even superficial (see Bourdieu, 1997, pp. 85–127; see also Adorno, 1982, pp. 7–76; 2011, pp. 140ff, 268–292). The upshot: reductionist and self-satisfied interpretations in which ideas are arbitrarily authorized/de-authorized by their origin. A salient feature of this interpretative strategy is that it misrecognizes both conceptual construction and how concepts acquire their historical determinations, as well as de-differentiates philosophical questions: namely, those of genesis and validity (Adorno, 1982, 74ff; 2008, pp. 83–84). How this is so is seen in Dussel's habit of sliding from one field to the other that in his engagement with the Frankfurt School finds expression in an aside on Parmenides' opposition, being/not being, which he arbitrarily casts off as being (Greek)/not-being (Barbarian) simply on the basis of Parmenides' origin, and thus, without further ado, charges this opposition with articulating a “closed off ontology of domination” (2015, p. 61; see also 1995, pp. 38–55; 2016, p. 120).

Obviously, that silences and exclusions can be found in narrative categories and historical emplotments is real enough, but these need to be taken on a case-by-case basis by way of careful immanent critique in relation to particular works and historical referents, not as theorems conceived independently of either. Rather, these need to be scrupulously worked through, as the best critics of Eurocentric narratives have done: say, Michel-Rolph Trouillot's brilliant *Silencing the Past* (1995), or, to a lesser extent, Jack Goody's *The Theft of History* (2006) or *The Eurasian Miracle* (2010).<sup>11</sup> Most recently, Sanjay Subrahmanyam's remarkable *Europe's India* (2017) formulates an iconoclastic yet scrupulous critique of the formation and persistence of Eurocentric tropes, whose consequences still reverberate in the present, that dispenses with commonplace narratives about Europe and offers a nuanced account of how different encounters with India, from the 16th to the 18th century, constitute multivalent and complex historical processes of collection

and representation, accumulation and schematization, carried on by different actors—missionaries, traders, military officers, physicians—from different nationalities bearing different cultural traditions and discourses: Portuguese, Dutch, English.

Subrahmanyam's work is exemplary in that it shows how an accurate understanding of these processes demands critical reading of sources that often reveal how the knowledge collected and accumulated undoes the schematization and representation accorded to it. Equally important, is to grasp the connected character of early modern history and offer sober mappings of the historical and political determinants behind the pervasiveness of tropes in different situations. More to the point: it is important to comprehend the persistence of these tropes in their particular loci of enunciation, which varies according to the situations in which these are formulated. This imposes upon the critic a comparative perspective that enables a re-cognition of the parallel but non-synchronous process of Indians acquiring ideas about Europe and both the symmetries and asymmetries involved.

Yet in the case of systems of thought, or traditions of discourse, the interpretative question for the dialectical critic is equally demanding. It consists of carefully considering and accounting for the mediating objective impossibilities structuring historical situations; and how these are social, historical, and, frequently, politically sanctioned. Similarly, in any political situation there are fractures and tensions, along with regressive and ideological motifs, which are not only related to historical impasses, but to historical sedimentations. And among these sedimentations one finds the internal politics of prior articulations of theoretical forms, and how these bear the traces of the political imperatives informing their initial articulation, and how theoretical forms could impair rather than enable a critical re-cognition of the impasses and blockages defining historical predicaments of power and domination.

But this is precisely what the decolonial critics of Critical Theory fail to do, as doing so would cast in a different light the actual historicity of the theoretical forms that infuse their own categories. For not only these are mostly drawn from the academic world of Theory, its precursors and patron saints, but also bear sediments of the emergence and political trajectory of Theory in the 1970s and unreflectively reproduce some of its gestures and forms (Vázquez-Arroyo, 2016, pp. 40–44, 57–60).

The dyad modernity/coloniality, for instance, reproduces some of the least appealing aspects of ideas like “epistemic” and “break” and their corollary oracular gestures devoid of differentiation and specificity. These echo the frequently arbitrary and often monolithic constructions associated with the early Foucault's idea of episteme (1966, pp. 11–13, 179). More to the point: in claiming to be more inclusive, the dyad modernity/coloniality actually de-differentiates struggles—and their particular loci—in ways that constitute a regression from the best subaltern scholarship, which carefully mapped out the complex intersections between gender and class in colonial situations without hypostatizing ideas of intersectionality. Ranajit Guha's “Chandra's Death,” one of his finest essays, is an exemplary model of what could be accomplished by lending a voice to suffering people without any trace of neo-nativist sentimentalizing, idealization of the subaltern, or banalities about discursive decolonization (1987, pp. 135–165; see also Guha, 1999).

In contrast, by reducing the racialization and gendering under colonial situations to a common transhistorical matrix, while tacitly severing the matrix from its class component and the forms of solidarity historically defining anti-colonialism, decolonial critics subsume what is particular about colonial situations into an abstract universality, a reduction that amounts to a form of neo-idealism. There is no better example of the perils involved in these reductions than the all-inclusive roll calls of Dussel's oceanic conception of victimhood anchored on his reworked idea of exteriority. The latter pivots on the de-differentiation—and thus reduction—of *particular* forms of suffering and domination into *particularities* of a universalizing trend either traceable to the dyad modernity/coloniality or encompassed in the catch-call ethical invocation of the Other. Ironically, it was Adorno, whose critical materialism and nuanced sense of superfluous suffering Dussel celebrates, who offered the most trenchant critique of the idealism involved in abstracting the particular, which, in its spatial and temporal differentiation is irreducible to the universal that mediates it, into a particularity of the universal (Adorno, 1973, pp. 173–174; Dussel, 1998, p. 339, 2015, pp. 53–54).

### 3 | REGRESSIONS

It is well known that, from Bernard Cohn to Ann Laura Stoler, a large body of scholarship has shown how forms of knowledge were constitutive of colonialism and colonial situations, and how these in turn produce knowledge. But it is a fundamental error to sever colonial knowledge from earthly situations by way of neologisms that, by changing the suffix, create an abstract noun that dirempts, de-differentiates, and disavows the actual historicity and political valences of particular situations and their constitutive form of solidarity and struggle. Relations of power in a particular situation, and the correlations of force and consent that constitute political orders—or how the continuous reproduction of, say, practices of racialization, sanction domination and exploitation—are thereby rendered abstract by the neologism that the change of suffix concocts. The upshot is a hypostatized formulation of colonialism as coloniality in which the particular determinations and historical determinants of colonialism are subsumed, if not entirely effaced, in an altogether looser category, akin to the ways in which strategies of backshadowing tend to reduce the particular contents of anti-colonial thought by casting it as decolonial *avant la lettre*.<sup>12</sup>

That this is the case can be seen even in the work of Santiago Castro-Gómez, the most intellectually impressive proponent of the idea of a “coloniality of power”. Castro-Gómez’s formulation of this notion builds upon but goes beyond Said-inspired ideas of colonial discourse by making reference to the “specific structure of domination implemented in the American colonies since 1492” (2005, p. 62). Even if still relying on Foucauldian-inflected ideas of epistemic, including epistemic violence, as well as relying on his genealogical method (with its attendant parables and oracular gestures), the phrase coloniality of power, he claims, aims at greater specificity. It zones in on a power relation anchored on ethnic and cognitive superiority that is expressed as domination, albeit not exclusively through coercive means, that nevertheless seeks to alter radically the cognitive, affective, even volitional, structures of the dominated in the image of white occidental men. Cognitive purity is thus correlated with blood purity and whiteness. And in Castro-Gómez’s particular inflection of this notion, the *encomienda* system constitutes a central locus of a civilizational effort to integrate the native population into European cultural patterns: both evangelization and forced labor were directed towards what he calls “the transformation of intimacy” that is central to the creation of civilized life (2005, p. 63).

Yet the historical record gainsays the basic tenets of this theoretical discourse; and this is not insignificant in light of its pretensions of specificity. That the *encomienda* system was first and foremost implemented in the Caribbean and Central America in ways that prefigured the colonial state in its management of culture and exploitation, largely for the sake of economic practices of extraction and farming—or that it was in some places rescinded before the end of the 16th century, and that where it persisted this institution changed significantly with a greater emphasis placed on land tenancy than cultural homogenization—is nowhere registered in his formulations.<sup>13</sup> Nor, despite Castro-Gómez’s specific genealogy of race and enlightenment in 18th-century New Granada, does he account for the continuities and discontinuities, the historical concatenations and connections, or the gamut of responses and the subtle changes in the perceptions and circumstances in particular colonial situations that would complicate the transhistorical dicta framing his inquiry in advance.<sup>14</sup> Instead, its theoretical discourse remains dirempted, and thus subject to hypostatization, from the historical processes it professes to theorize.

Invocations of discursive decolonization severed from any determinate historical referents and materialist determinants in constructions like the coloniality of power thus become something of a placeholder—a sandbox of sorts into which all sites of power/resistance are abstractly consigned—and both theoretical and political critique are hindered. Theoretically, concepts and categories that question nativism and its exclusions are debarred; politically, past empires are sandblasted, while forms of political rule at odds with genuinely emancipatory politics and policies are either eschewed or de-authorized in ways that are detrimental to struggles for justice, freedom, and equality. It is not without irony that in the name of difference particular struggles unfolding in concrete historical conditions are de-differentiated and thus de-historicized. It is along these lines that colonialism qua a historical process is de-historicized and ultimately becomes hypostatized in ways that both colonial and pre-colonial situations are distorted and, by extension, misrecognized.<sup>15</sup> In the name of “decolonial difference” actual differences are erased and subsumed under a de-differentiated neologism, an indiscriminate category seeking to supervene every present-day form of resistance and subsume it within itself.

#### 4 | A NEW CATECHISM

Nothing demonstrates the foregoing reductions better than decolonial critiques of Eurocentrism. At the hands of many postcolonial and decolonial critics, once an idea crystallizes in Europe, it is either fully formed, or ultimately shackled by its locus of origin, and not subject to change or completion by transcultural encounters (Ortiz, 2002, pp. 254–260, 414–424ff). This constitutes a disavowal of the historicity of ideas and forms of thought, the continuities and innovations, fissures and sediments, that constitute the advent and formulation of political ideas and concepts. For concepts acquire and lose determinations along with their social and cultural, historical and political presuppositions in historically constituted situations; and this process can be adequately grasped and understood only from a historically mediated perspective that enables a scrupulously differentiated reconstruction of how ideas and concepts evolve and unfold in the context of complex historical concatenations. But this cannot be accurately undertaken by adjudicating the critical import of an idea on the basis of its purported origin, or by a reified sense of situated enunciation, much less in terms of de-historicized and ultimately hypostatized ideas of Europe that misrecognize both Europe and the non-European.

It is along these lines that there is something like a decolonial catechism that needs to be critically interrogated. First, the reification of origin, locus of enunciation and situatedness, which is in of itself a symptom of the epistemologically and politically debilitating form of identity politics characteristic of advanced liberal-capitalist political orders. Second, the fallacy/illusion of “the first,” a spinning off of the conceit of the “original” that has marred so much critical reflection, and over which many a substantial thinker has agonized, even if the historical sedimentations of any concept can be more readily seen in the historical processes through which it concatenates rather than in its original coinage; better yet, commonplaces about “the first” are at best an illusion, and at worst an ideological fallacy, that conflates genesis with validity. Third, the neo-nativist temptation of *indigène* that is at work in defining the non-European and the rhetoric of victimhood that is its frequent corollary, one whose ethical valence is deeply depoliticizing. It occludes the ways in which the suffering of so-called victims is the result of political struggles, and how their suffering at the hands of unscrupulous victors is best redressed not by recourse to sentimentalizing pieties but by a sober reckoning with the content and context of the struggle itself, the animating ideas of the defeated and the reasons for their defeat (Vázquez-Arroyo, 2016, 210ff; cf. Traverso, 2016, pp. 22–53). This includes past cruelties and injustices and the role played in their defeat by traitors, collaborators, and the structural beneficiaries of colonial situations of domination, which are not necessarily variations of settler colonialism. Fourth, uncritical inheritance of what Perry Anderson has aptly called Foucault’s “panurgic metaphysics of power,” which, with its hypostatized claims about knowledge, its production, and dissemination, has led many a historical judgment astray (Anderson, 2009, p. 201).<sup>16</sup>

That historical judgments do go astray can be clearly seen in the potted historical accounts undergirding Dussel’s decolonial philosophy of liberation. Even when Dussel effectively challenges the Eurocentric banalities and Hellenocentrism found in many narratives of world history, and thus invites a re-cognition of the historicity of the west, his erudite philosophical histories are marred by etymological conceits and a penchant for plotting history in Manichean terms that ultimately amount to simplified parables of instruction propping ideas arrived at independently of critical accounts of historical eventuation subject to empirical controls.<sup>17</sup> These philosophical histories, moreover, exhibit the inverted Eurocentrism at work in Dussel’s philosophical system. It is found not only in his system-building theoretical forms—Adorno’s seminal critique of philosophical systems goes unheeded—but also in how his philosophical history grants primacy to large polities, empires, and civilizations (De la Luz-Rodríguez, 2014).

Take the following statement:

*No conquest had taken place in the Caribbean ... since no urban culture existed in those regions, but only scattered indigenous tribes and ethnic groups. The slaughter and seizure of small villages could not compare with the subjugation of the Mexican empire. (Dussel, 1995, p. 38)*

Idealizations like this misrecognize the ethnic and political complexities of Caribbean polities; bear an urban bias; and, ironically, privilege imperial polities over non-imperial forms. Indeed, there is a backhanded symmetry at work in this particular formulation. It reproduces, *mutatis mutandi*, the same smugness of those who, within Europe, sneered at

Hernán Cortés after his participation in Charles V's failed expedition to Algeria in 1541 for having "had his battles and encounters with naked people," as opposed to the formidable Ottomans, against whom he failed (Luis Vélez de Guevara, cited in Subramahnyam, 2012, p. 17). Politically, these potted histories do little honor to the past and weaken political literacy in the present.

Behind this inverted Eurocentrism lays the tacit silencing of the actual political agency of many of the indigenous tribes that, as part of the management of difference in colonial situations, abetted the conquistadors in light of the social complexity and ethnic diversity of the pre-Hispanic world. Instead of the historical realities of Indian Conquistadors, say, native allies who for different reasons provided support and large numbers of warriors in the conquest of Mesoamerica, we have an oscillation between something closer to that cliché of the European Enlightenment, "the noble savage," and idealization of pre-colonial imperial polities.<sup>18</sup> At one point Dussel even reproduces the structure of the Kantian categorical imperative to suggest the existence of an "ontology-ethics" binding all in the pre-Columbine world—"from the Inca to the last peasant or dominated people [*pueblo dominado*]"—with the effect of concealing the role played by Incan and Aztec empires as the exploitative overlords of many a *pueblo dominado* and their own environment (2007, pp. 34–35; cf. De la Luz-Rodríguez, 2014, pp. 90, 93–94). Idealizations and conceits like the foregoing reproduce, *mutatis mutandi*, structures of argumentation and theoretical forms readily found in the most odious forms of Eurocentrism that Dussel purports to criticize.

## 5 | THE COLONIAL SITUATION

Georges Balandier's interpretation of colonialism from the perspective of the primacy of the situation constitutes the obvious point of departure for a genuinely critical and dialectical understanding of colonialism (Balandier, 1951, 1970, 1971, 2002).<sup>19</sup> As a historically constituted and politically authorized cultural, social, and economic condition, colonialism is manifested in concrete situations that are both temporally and spatially differentiated. In these situations, racial practices and discourses, as well as webs of cultural, economic, and political significations are structured and produced. The colonial situation is thus a differentiated space of contradictory encounters, conflict, and negotiations.

As a conceptual construction, as Bernard Cohn observed in the early 1960s, it grasps how "the European colonialist and the indigene are united in one analytical field" without reverting to pieties about impact, or euphemisms about culture contact, let alone attempts to sift through "what is introduced from what is indigenous" (2004, p. 44). Rather, since its initial formulation in the field of anthropology, this approach has had the virtue of seeking to map the totality of colonial power, in its cultural, material, and ideological levels. Its loci of analysis are not particular groups, but a study of the differentiated totality—that is, the colonial situation—and how power relations are structured, exercised, and institutionalized as part of this dynamic and contradictory totality. An aspect of this theorization is well captured by Fredrick Cooper, a leading contemporary historian of colonialism who has drawn upon Balandier's concept: "Conquest itself created a 'colonial situation' ... defined by external cohesion and a racialized ideology within a space marked by conquest boundaries" (2005, pp. 107–108). As such, this approach requires close study of ruling classes and forms of rule—including dominance by expropriation and exploitation, along with the mechanisms, practices, and forms of knowledge marshaled to this purpose—as well as responses from the ruled, which range from active resistance to collaboration. The violent conquests constitutive of colonial situations thus inaugurate predicaments of power beset with forms of historical and political agency that complicate the dyad colonizer/colonized and call for political explanation as opposed to moralization.

Conceptualizing colonialism from the perspective of the colonial situation thus enables a historically accurate understanding of colonialism and the different—because asymmetrical—but real modalities of political agency constituting rulers and ruled. It is this aspect of this formulation that is most consonant with the best historiography and thought to come from subaltern studies. Think, for instance, of Guha's brilliant recasting of the concept hegemony and how it opens up the possibility for a concrete and differentiated account of power and dominance in which one can distinguish between, on the one hand, relations of domination that are constitutive of a colonial situation, and, on the other, the relations, practices, and patterns that are specific for the dissemination and reproduction of



domination in a colonial situation but whose matrices—along with other forms of domination that often precede the colonial situation—are irreducible to colonialism, even when these become restructured and not infrequently intensified within the colonial situation (1997).<sup>20</sup>

In colonial situations colonialism is established politically, as a set of relations with a new power that constitutes a new depoliticized collectivity in which complex processes of subordination, and strategies of resistance and negotiation—the stuff of politics, even in its depoliticized versions—crystallize in an asymmetrical relation of power through which the identities of colonized and colonizer are dialectically forged. Understanding colonialism in terms of concrete colonial situations thus allows for critical mappings of the different levels of contradictions within the colonial totality and its aftermath and the forms of action and agency found in the interstices of these contradictions. Similarly, conceiving colonialism from the perspective of the colonial situation invites a critical reckoning with differentiated temporalities in terms of what Ernst Bloch famously conceptualized as noncontemporaneity, rather than in terms of commonplaces about the denial of coevalness (see Ganguly, 2004; Melas, 2014). With its spatial and collective connotations, through the concept of colonial situation one can soberly grasp how the non-synchronicity of the synchronous (*Ungleichzeitigkeit*) in the constitution of colonial situations is thoroughly mediated by the dreary violence of colonialism.

By deploying this concept, moreover, one is able to avoid the two pitfalls found in contemporary discussions of colonialism: a moralizing Manichaeism and romances of pre-colonial authenticity. In contrast, the concept of “the colonial situation” not only brings back political and economic determinants to the understanding of colonialism, but accounts for the dialectical mediations and sedimentations in the totality that the new colonial society is, as a social and cultural unit. It sharply focuses on how relations between metropolis and colony constitute a novel totality with its particular determinations on the basis of an asymmetrical relation of power; the ruptures these relations represent and the new continuities these inaugurate; and how these are sedimented and remain continuous after the end of official colonialism.

Thinking about particular colonial situations also restores political and cultural agency to the colonized.<sup>21</sup> Recognizing the agency of subalterns, which includes collaboration in colonial situations frequently defined by dominance without hegemony, need not mean creating an artificial equivalence between colonizer and colonized, nor differentiating the different degrees of responsibility each holds for the colonial situation, and how the conqueror is ultimately responsible for the colonial situation, not the conquered. To make sense of the political agency of, say, Indian conquistadors, and to establish different degrees of responsibility in a colonial situation, including those of the structural beneficiaries, it is imperative to move beyond reified ideas the Other, the European and the Non-European. While the beginning of the process of historical eventuation that leads to a colonial situation is often marked by conquest—an incident that may or may not be recorded as an event in the annals of the empire in question—the contours of the situation are far more elusive, differentiated, and contradictory, while sediments of the colonial process continue to accrue (Stoler, 2009, pp. 105–139).

The continuities between colonialism and postcolonialism are, of course, one of the clearest instantiations of how there are many sedimentations from colonial situations that continue into the postcolonial moment. “Post,” of course, signifies a rupture that in the case of colonialism is at once temporal and spatial: the time after colonialism and the restructuring of political space when the imperial power has been ceded to or became evicted from the colony. Examples of how postcolonial conditions are mediated by the colonial situations that preceded them abound: some of the best known are the racialization of identities, the institutionalized patterns of land reform (or lack thereof), national identity, and state institutions. Postcolonial Africa is often the site in which these continuities are clearly found. Take the violence that is ravaging DRC, a veritable catastrophe whose death toll towers over that of Darfur, even if in the North Atlantic fold the violence in the DRC is mostly depicted as criminal, or as stemming from the trafficking of diamonds and other rogue agents (Mamdani, 2007). But, as Mahmood Mamdani has recently reminded North Atlantic westerners, the seemingly senseless violence of DRC, which in their eyes remains unintelligible, is deeply mediated by a structural continuum from the colonial past, which is cultural, and institutional (and political): the invention of *indigène* and the continuous role of “the native authority” and the ways in which, as a system of tribal authority, it “asserts a necessary connection between power, culture, and territory,” all of which is part of the political thrust of the violence



that currently ravages the region (Mamdani, 1996, pp. 21–23, 138–179; 2011, 2011, 2012). And just as the colonial situation is politically constituted, so is the postcolonial condition and its constitutive situations. Both remain unintelligible without an adequate mapping of the ways in which ideas and practices eventuate in both their continuities and discontinuities.

But none of these all too important epistemological and political distinctions can be made when colonialism is hypostatized, let alone when a neologism, say, “coloniality,” supervenes them all and makes power into a supernumerary entity whose discursive articulations are severed from any objective material referents.<sup>22</sup> Instead, from the perspective of the colonial situation, the discursive components of colonialism are mapped and criticized in close proximity to their material and historical determinants. By bringing the material and the discursive into a single field of vision a more historically accurate and politically enabling comprehension of colonialism is possible.

## 6 | SEDIMENTATIONS

Generally speaking, concepts grasp, seize, and comprehend. But these critical operations can only be comprehended in terms of their historical unfolding, which often takes the form of a series of concatenations *in history* that reveal the unity of the continuity and discontinuity that constitutes historical processes, and in relation to the objective situations that concepts seize and grasp. Concepts thus acquire their determinations over time. And these determinations are not only mediated by the different situations that constitute the sites in which concepts and ideas gain traction, but also by the different mediums through which these are formulated, expanded and, in some cases, popularized or reproduced (Debray, 1991). To historicize concepts is to think about historical mediation, sediments, and the primacy of the object, as well as of the situation. Or, stated differently, critical reflection and re-cognition of the historically constituted nature of conceptual determinations, and how concepts bear these determinations, which are often expressed as “socio-historical” presuppositions that become graspable only in the situations in which the concepts are misplaced (Schwarz, 1992; see also López, 2005, 2011). From this dialectical and materialist perspective, to conceptualize the misplacement of an idea or concept requires a crucial distinction between misplacement and non-identity.

The latter is a central tenet of Adorno's negative dialectic, and consists of his signature innovation within the tradition of critical reason that runs through German Idealism. The emphasis on the non-identical, however, belongs to an epistemological problematic that calls attention to the ways in which concepts are never identical with objects, and how the relation is one of distanced nearness; yet one in which the principle of identity, which is conceptual, is the medium of reflection on the non-identical. Sociologically speaking, this insight can be seen to be at work in Adorno's reflections on Max Weber's notion of the ideal type, which is central to his own reworking of Benjamin's idea of “constellation” in *Negative Dialectics* (Adorno, 2003, Vol. 6, pp. 166–168). Ideal types, as explicitly conceived by Weber, are ad hoc constructions, “heuristic instruments, heuristic means, with which the historical material is to be compared” (Adorno, 2000, p. 119).

There is thus a constitutive disjunction between the ideal type and the materials whose variations and continuities it seeks to grasp. And ideal types are heuristic abstractions that acquire something of the structured matter they seek to apprehend, grasp, and even prescribe. Both concepts and ideal types, accordingly, end up with the imprint of “the objective structure” mediating them (Adorno, 2000, p. 123). And this impress constitutes one layer of the sedimentation that concepts bear from their inception; another sediment, however, is how concepts are not only mediated by objective structures, but by prior articulations in philosophical systems.<sup>23</sup> All of which suggests that sedimentations need not only to be traced and detected, but also carefully worked through.

In the case of political concepts, sediments are like scars denoting a non-identical identity with the objective historical processes connoted, as historical sediment embedded in the determinations of the concept. In contrast, invoking the image of misplaced concepts consists of a plea to historicize the mediations involved in the traveling of properly political concepts from their initial formulation into different historically and politically constituted spaces. It is in the dialectic of identity and non-identity found in these misplacements that the socio-historical presuppositions

of concepts, along with their sedimentations, can be immanently worked through, not only to apprehend the concept, but also its determinations and historicity.

Political concepts, accordingly, are formed in the mediations of historical eventuation and theoretical formulations. More to the point: the first formulation of a concept is hardly exhaustive and it does not command epistemological primacy, or determines its logical or political validity. Here one needs to distinguish between chronology and causality, as well. For the origin of a term, its initial coinage, is one thing: another, is its non-identical application to the object it grasps; and yet another its misplacement. For instance, the initial coinage of a term usually reflects the realization of a novel or singular historical reality that is taken to be irreducible to already existing terminology. Thus, no coinage of a word, much less the formulation of a concept, is ever *ex nihilo*. It is thoroughly mediated by a *before*, which may either consist of already embedded processes or incipient ones, and extends into an *after*, which may well involve forms of transmission mediated by historical, political, and social processes. Either way, it is an unhistorical fallacy to assume that once a word is coined a concept is conjured up with all its determinations in place, or that its validity depends on its chronological eventuation or geographical location.

There is then something profoundly misleading, not to say incoherent, about neo-nativist efforts to shackle certain concepts to their European origins. Progress, democracy, power, critique, dictator, violence, citizenship, equality, freedom, history, party, nation, religion, secularism, patriot—all arguably became theoretically articulated first in European intellectual traditions. But to assume that the initial coinage was a pristine process devoid of connected histories is historically naïve and politically debilitating. Timothy Brennan has offered a trenchant formulation that speaks directly to the foregoing concerns: “[I]deas should be judged by their effect and value rather than their place of origin (from affiliation rather than filiation, in Said’s terms) but also because the creation of those ideas was not uniquely European”. Intellectual and political borrowing

*is the logical outcome of the terrain one inherits—a terrain, we should not forget, constructed not within a hermetically enclosed, culturally uniform continent but by dissidents and conformists side by side, who came both from within and outside Europe. (Brennan, 2014b, p. 83)*

Of course, there is an important difference between transactions within European countries and those with the non-European world. And the greater the historical and cultural distance, along with the geopolitical imperatives and forms of power structuring cross-cultural transmissions and connected histories, the more the historicity sedimented in a concept is and the more inadequate it becomes.<sup>24</sup> But such inadequacy need not imply incommensurability, or the hypostatization of difference. One of Roberto Schwarz’s formulations succinctly states the stakes involved:

*[I]n countries that have emerged from colonization, the system of historical categories shaped by intra-European experience comes to function in a space with a different but not an alien sociological conjunction in which those categories neither apply properly nor can help but be applied. . . . This space is different because colonization did not create societies similar to that of the mother country, nor did the subsequent international division of labor make them equal. But it is a space of the same order, for it too is controlled by the embracing dynamic of capital, whose developments give it a standard and define its guidelines. (Schwarz, 1999b, p. 117, trans. modified; see also 1999a, p. 95)<sup>25</sup>*

It is in terms of this dialectic of the universal and the particular in colonial and postcolonial situations, and the predicaments of power constituting them, and not by reference to origins, that the political valences and critical import of political categories is best considered.

Democracy, citizen and nation—one emerging in ancient Greece, another in the Roman Republic, the third in France—these are words that not only traveled within Europe, and thus changed valences as they found a concrete historical eventuation, as they become concepts with concrete determinations, but were exported by empires, thus bearing the sediments of imperial ventures. Even so, in colonial and postcolonial situations these terms have provided a basis to evict many an imperial master and inaugurate new forms of collective agency (see, among others, Anderson, 2005; Brading, 1993; Dubois, 2004). Moreover, while they are not autochthonous in most parts of the world, these terms have nevertheless become central to the vocabulary of political contestation; either because they

resonated with historical processes or ideological and objective realities already in place, or because their arrival become an occasion to forge a political formation from existing materials, or to criticize abstract and frequently bogus invocations of the aspirations these ideas embodied by ruling elites.

Whatever the case, however, it makes little sense to reject these *tout court* as foreign impositions in the name of a neo-nativist nationalism, let alone rhetorically sniff out terms one rejects politically for their supposed Eurocentric stench in the name of exteriority or the Other, which are, of course, constructions originally forged in Europe. An abused concept that has been rendered captious, the Other, Serge Gruzinski has argued, projects a hyperbolic sense of social and cultural incommensurability in which distance and difference are frequently overstated, sometimes reified, occasionally even concocted (2010, p. 42 et seq; see also Subrahmanyam, 2012, pp. 23–30). It thereby conceals the dialectic of continuities and discontinuities of historical processes in which histories are connected and concatenated, and thus dodges the coincidences and connections that make possible the conflictual coexistence between humans in social formations.

Nevertheless, the inadequate implementation of political ideas and concepts, in itself a historically mediated upshot, needs to be carefully historicized along the lines Schwartz suggests: as different, but not alien; and as structured by a larger socio-political dynamic, which, in turn, has a structuring effect, and thus constitutes an objective structuring structure whose concrete eventuation is always particular and thoroughly mediated. It is, accordingly, necessary to map critically the *traveling* of thought-forms and ideas, and their *misplacements*, along with the different appropriations and displacements, erasures and sedimentations, continuities and innovations. History, of course, conceived in materialist terms, but not as an undifferentiated ground for everything. It is actually Schwarz, a formidable defender of dialectical historicism, who has offered the clearest defense of the relative autonomy of ideas and concepts: “history is not the primary ground for *everything*, on whose basis everything should be interpreted, even what tries to escape it” (Schwarz, 2012, p. 29).<sup>26</sup> This relative autonomy is habitually a consequence of the internal cogency of philosophical systems and problematics. But the tenor of Schwarz’s formulation tacitly requires further specifications: for instance, how exactly is history invoked in any given context and what are the terms in which such invocations are articulated. What his dialectical historicism clearly delivers, however, is an account of how the misplacement to other sites of contestation, with different historical configurations and imperatives, often leads to more concrete formulations of concepts and ideas.

## 7 | CRITICAL ORIGINALITY

The dialectical mediation between the universal and the particular in singular situations is at the heart of the foregoing discussion. How it bears on the question of originality is vividly staged in Jorge Luis Borges’s remarkable essay, “El escritor argentino y la tradición” (1966). Famously, Borges characterizes the question the title of his essay bears as a “rhetorical theme,” as nothing more than a “pseudo-problem” (1966, p. 267). In doing so, his essay resonates with Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis’ (1959) “Instinto de nacionalidade” (1873), where the great Brazilian novelist offered a similar plea for the right of non-Europeans to write about any thematic of their choosing, no matter how remote in time and space, and thus repudiate nativist imperatives of picturesque local color and other fatuities of cultural patriotism; an *avant la lettre* critique of today’s neo-nativist reification of identity-cum-ethnic politics. Roberto Schwarz has offered a memorable formulation of this critique:

*Machado said that the writer could be “a man of his time and his country, even when he deals with subjects remote in time and space.” The critic was trying to secure for Brazilians the right to deal with every kind of subject matter, as opposed to the point of view “that only recognizes national qualities in works that deal with local topics.” (Schwarz, 2001, p. 1).*

Machado thus invoked an acute sense of historicity that, rather than becoming “a straightjacket on the intelligence,” enabled a bidirectional critical disposition: on the one hand, it broke through any nativist imperative, and thus emancipated the writer from nativist conscription; on the other, as the main character of *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* clearly exemplifies, asserted the freedom to pluck references from all the corners of the planet, of humanity’s history,

which at once decontextualizes both these references and the critic when he brings these references to his context (Schwarz, 2001, p. 134).

From these reflections emerges a critical task that is a natural corollary of the dialectical legacy of Critical Theory: to construe processes of decentering and decontextualization, and map critically the different historical, social, and political mediations involved. Doing so involves not only accurately registering the misplacements involved, but also how, in their non-identity with the new (decontextualized) context, these misplaced references reveal the socio-historical presuppositions they carry as sediments. And how these presuppositions shed critical light on both the context of origin and that of arrival, and how these references acquire different determinations and attributes in the new situation in which these are misplaced and invoked. It is the dialectical inadequacy of these references, their non-identity, that opens up the critical space for reflection and comparison in the context of the historical processes and practices that mediate the dialectic of identity and non-identity intrinsic to their inadequacy.

But this inadequacy, it bears repeating, is double-edged: first, it reveals the ways in which some of these references, say, “the enlightenment,” in non-European or colonial situations could reveal themselves negatively, as ideological entanglements carrying social and cultural sediments; but, second, how these inadequacies force the need to work immanently through the sedimentations these bear in order to redeem its critical import by re-cognizing the predicaments its actualization poses in this new context, or by conceptualizing the enlightenment on a different sociological and political basis. C. L. R. James’s *Black Jacobins* is a masterpiece of precisely this dialectical reversal in which the enlightenment qua a European phenomenon is both interrogated and reworked in the name of the concrete universality the very title of the book announces, which, of course, renders the enlightenment inadequate for Europe and critically discerns the fractures that emerge from its decontextualization in the context of the concrete predicaments of power that define the colonial situation (Vázquez-Arroyo, 2017). And the fractures detected by this dual process of inadequacy demand an interpretation of the historical impasses and blockages these inadequacies symptomatize.

Yet one thing is clear: both the pseudo-problem of originality and potted accounts of Eurocentrism must be overcome. Critical adaptation, even “judicious imitation,” as Schwarz has shown, yield insights leading to “the recognition of [how] a disadvantageous starting point” could create “the conditions for critical independence,” and also how “historical mimesis, duly imbued with critical sense” need “not lead to provincialism, nationalism, or backwardness,” but could be enabling conditions for articulating genuinely concrete universals (Schwarz, 2001, pp. 104, 164).<sup>27</sup> Shedding the pseudo-problem of originality, which includes practices of authorization on the basis of origin, and avowing how ideas concatenate in history and the interpretative richness of their concrete misplacements as part of political struggles and socioeconomic processes in colonial, postcolonial, or neocolonial situations, becomes paramount. This may well be a precondition of becoming good, or at least adequate interpreters of our current predicaments and the historicity of our thought forms.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this work I capitalize Critical Theory to emphasize an intellectual tradition that, while mostly associated with Frankfurt, has a transatlantic dimension that runs from Adorno and Horkheimer’s own sojourns in the USA to the scholars working in this tradition that are nevertheless based on this side of the Atlantic. The contrast between Critical Theory and other critical theoretical forms, including what in the humanities is often referred to as simply Theory, is more systematically pursued in a study, soon to appear, tentatively titled, *Wayward Dialectics*.

<sup>2</sup> Buck-Morss wrote: “Why is ending the silence of Hegel and Haiti important? ... There are many possible answers, but one is surely the potential of rescuing the idea of universal human history from the uses to which white domination has put it. If the historical facts about freedom can be ripped out of the narratives told by the victors and salvaged for our own time, then the project of universal freedom does not need to be discarded but, rather, redeemed and reconstituted on a different basis” (Buck-Morss, 2002, pp. 864–865).

<sup>3</sup> I discuss Allen’s book in a forthcoming review in *Contemporary Political Theory*. James D. Ingram’s has offered an excellent mapping of the different efforts within Critical Theory to think through the foregoing intersection (forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup> Allen dismisses this question too breezily, even when it establishes a distinction that is at heart of the divisions within the field, and which would have made her arguments less one-sided (2015, pp. 23–24); and so does Ann Laura Stoler, who too readily concedes that postcolonial “is not a time period but a critical stance” (2016, p. ix.). However, the question at stake here

is how the theoretical forms upon which most of mainstream postcolonialism relies are incapable of adequately mapping, grasping, and representing colonial and postcolonial historical conditions.

- <sup>5</sup> The field of postcolonial studies is differentiated and often (fiercely) contested in terms of how history and theoretical forms are understood. It is thus a mistake to reduce this deeply contested field to its most mainstream figures—say, Bhabha, Chatterjee, Chakrabarty, and Spivak—to the exclusion of a dialectical current that has contested the dominant version from its inception, a narrowing of the field to which my 2008 essay was not entirely immune.
- <sup>6</sup> Enzo Traverso has offered a thoughtful account of the “missed dialogue” between Theodor W. Adorno and C. L. R. James (1989, 2001). In spite of many a parallel between the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and James’ *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways*, and their coincidence in New York City, such dialogue did not happen (2016, pp. 166–177).
- <sup>7</sup> Nelson Maldonado-Torres has shown some of the limits of Dussel’s attempt to bring a materialist dimension to Levinas’s idea of ethics as first philosophy; except that rather than offering a genuine critique of this conceit, he seeks to outdo Dussel by defending a “de-colonial reduction” whose pseudo-concreteness and truncation are as obvious as Levinas’s own formulations (2008, pp. 98–102, 163ff.). George Ciccariello-Maher has offered a qualified defense of Dussel’s concretization of “exteriority” (2017, pp. 107–121; cf. Vázquez-Arroyo, 2018).
- <sup>8</sup> Dussel has never satisfactorily demonstrated how the dialectical mediations that are so central to the theoretical architecture of Marx can be sublated into an account of the Other, whose pre-ontological claims to be a *prima philosophia* dislodges any meaningful sense of dialectical mediation. Instead, Dussel arbitrarily redefines “materialism” and “mediation” in an attempt to upend these concepts by a redefinition that sidesteps, and thus leaves unaddressed, the conceptual questions at stake. But, like all such idealists attempts at changing the subject, either by using etymological vanities, idiosyncratic definitions or neologisms, it flounders; as does cutting Marx down to size by going so far as to call *Capital* an ethics (2016, pp. 58–59, 67–69, 38–40, 118). Elsewhere, I have offered a critique of the transatlantic turn to ethics, and the variation exemplified by Levinas and his most notable North Atlantic heirs—Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida—along with a reconstruction of Adorno’s critique of *prima philosophia* and his arguments for the centrality of mediation in Critical Theory (Vázquez-Arroyo, 2016, pp. 25–62, 139–208; see also Bosteels, 2012, 299ff).
- <sup>9</sup> Again: the attempt to recast the hypostatized exteriority of Levinas, along historical-materialist lines, as exclusion, remains truncated because the formal architecture of his philosophy remains committed to an ethics-first approach that privileges the false immediacy of “the face” (see Dussel, 1998, pp. 363, 366; 2007, pp. 73–74; 2016, pp. 12–13, 119).
- <sup>10</sup> Dussel’s essay misses other key aspects of Frankfurt School Critical Theory and underestimates the challenge the writings of the first generation pose to the Levinas-inspired ethics that scaffolds his project, which is yet another version of the preconception of “ethics first”—for Dussel rather ceremoniously criticizes the first generation of the Frankfurt School for lacking an ethic with little regard to the reasons they offered—a bias that Max Horkheimer’s 1933 essay, “Materialism and Morality,” vigorously questions, and that Adorno’s negative dialectic puts to rest. Similarly, as indicated above, he chides Critical Theory’s supposed reliance on an ontological sense of the Totality, even if Adorno not only dialectically challenged the positing of any ontology, but to the extent that totality is at work in his writings, it is an epistemological concept, as part of critical reason’s ability to re-cognize the social total process that thoroughly mediates subjective experience.
- <sup>11</sup> In contrast to Trouillot, Goody’s engagement with the works of historians (say, Moses Finley or Perry Anderson) is often tentative. He is, however, on solid ground when he zones in on the actual archeological and historical record, shows complex interactions among Eurasian civilizations from the onset of the Bronze Age on, and the contingent and temporary nature of the advantages of the North Atlantic West (Goody, 2006, pp. 1–25; 2010).
- <sup>12</sup> The most extreme version of this strategy is found in Walter Mignolo (2011). Michael André Bernstein has formulated the idea of backshadowing in *Forgone Conclusions* (1994). Lack of space precludes an examination of these anachronistic gestures, all too prevalent in this field. Suffice it to say that these cut down to size anticolonial thinkers and make them decolonial or postcolonial *avant la lettre*; a strategy that conflates anticolonial with postcolonial and decolonial, and blurs the differences between subaltern studies and postcolonial theory, along with the fissures in both camps, and the roads not taken. Like the nationalist narratives of old, such conflations construe long and illustrious genealogies for recent fabrications, and thereby authorize practices of self-anointment. Evidence for this is found in a recent collection in which some of the editors and contributors insert themselves in a long canon and take turns to write about each other (Dussel, Mendieta, & Bohórquez, 2009).
- <sup>13</sup> On the encomienda system the *locus classicus* (unmentioned by Castro-Gómez) is Silvio A. Zavala’s *La Encomienda Indiana* (1935). Also instructive is Lockhart’s “Encomienda and Hacienda” (1969). Gabriel De la Luz-Rodríguez, to whom I am indebted, has convincingly interpreted the encomienda as a cultural mechanism of discipline and control that prefigured the colonial state formation (2003).
- <sup>14</sup> In *La Hybris del Punto Cero* Castro-Gómez industriously and impressively collects data to illustrate the dictums of the coloniality of power. Even so, the result is a patchwork of data and dicta that, however diligent and erudite, reeks of arbitrariness and shirks any genuine historicization.

- <sup>15</sup> Similarly unrecognized is the nature of the rupture brought about by the advent of colonial situations and the dialectic of continuity and discontinuity involved. Apropos of his critical account of the involution and missed opportunities within subaltern studies, Sumit Sarkar has offered a set of formulations that is apposite here: "The possibility of pre-colonial forms of domination, however modified, persisting through colonialism, helping to mediate colonial authority in vital ways, maybe even functioning autonomously at times—for all of which there is ample evidence—is simply ignored. Colonial rule is assumed to have brought about an absolute rupture: the colonized subject is taken to have been literally constituted by colonialism alone"; and this unhistorical sense of rupture occludes how, for instance, patriarchal domination was "overwhelmingly indigenous in its structures," even if within colonialism it became intensified (Sarkar, 2000, pp. 306–310).
- <sup>16</sup> Santiago Castro-Gómez has drawn a distinction between Foucault's thematization of colonialism, which is cast as Eurocentric, and his formal analytic of power, which is not necessarily Eurocentric (2007, pp. 164–165). This is a perfect illustration of how arbitrary the Eurocentric label is dispensed. For what he says about Foucault could be said with even more justice about many other thinkers who are nevertheless unceremoniously dismissed by decolonial thinkers. Furthermore, the distinction is at once true and false: its true content consists in that the validity of thought forms cannot be satisfactorily assessed by their genesis. Its limitation, however, consists in the way in which constructions like this conveniently leave aside the ways in which thought forms bear sediments not only from prior articulations in other philosophical systems but, similarly, of the socio-historical presuppositions, and political imperatives, mediating the prior formulations.
- <sup>17</sup> At the end of one of his majestic reconstructions, Dussel attractively acknowledges the fallibility of his historical accounts, only to immediately double-down on the most problematic aspect: its overall vision, and the ensuing framing (2007, p. 551ff).
- <sup>18</sup> The ethnohistorical evidence belies these pieties and idealizations about the conquest and pre-Columbian empires (see Mathews & Oudijk, 2007; Restall, 2003, pp. 1–26, 44–63). After examining some of the key pieces of ethnohistorical evidence of the initial conquest of the island of San Juan (Puerto Rico), Gabriel De la Luz-Rodríguez offers a considered verdict that bears repeating: "The colonial project was not a one-dimensional phenomenon with which a singular logic of conquest and destruction resulted in a totally 'other' society. Such a perspective simplifies what was a complex relation between elements of continuity and discontinuity in the historical process. It also negates indigenous historical agency" (2017, p. 231).
- <sup>19</sup> For an argument about "the primacy of the situation," as constitutive of genuinely dialectical political theorizing, see Vázquez-Arroyo (2016, pp. 15–20, 209ff).
- <sup>20</sup> Vivek Chibber has offered a critique of Guha's account of Europe (2013). But see Timothy Brennan's "Subaltern Stakes" (2014a), which has many claims to be the best critical engagement with Chibber's book. Another virtue of Brennan's essay is that it clearly shows the fundamental difference between postcolonial theory and subaltern studies. Although frequently brigaded by postcolonial theorists and critics, the generative matrix for Guha's work is the historiographical project of subaltern studies. See also Perry Anderson's characteristically judicious interpretation of Guha (2017, pp. 99–107).
- <sup>21</sup> Shakespeare's *The Tempest* has succinctly and powerfully lent expression to this important tenet, as long formulated by Roberto Fernández Retamar (2003): "Caliban: 'You taught me language, and my profit on't [on it]/Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you/For learning me your language!'" (*The Tempest*: Act 1, Scene 2).
- <sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the interplay between contingency and necessity needs to be mapped in reference to concrete situations—that is what the primacy of the situation demands, which is the political correlate of what Adorno defends as the primacy of the object in his formulation of Critical Theory as negative dialectic (2003, vol. 6, pp. 184–186, Vol. 10, pp. 741ff.; 2008, p. 325ff).
- <sup>23</sup> While a careful consideration of Adorno's published writings offers evidence of the centrality of historical sedimentations (2003, Vol. 6, pp. 165, 241), more explicit formulations are found in his lecture courses (2010, p. 111ff; 1973–1975, Vol. 2, pp. 10–1233–45, 82–92. See also Adorno's "Thesen über die Sprache des Philosophen," unpublished during his lifetime (2003, Vol. 1, pp. 368–369).
- <sup>24</sup> The foregoing discussion poses other analytically distinct questions that for lack of space remain unaddressed in this essay: first, the difference between the use of European categories by mestizos, as part of a dialectic of adaptation and recycling with the native language, and the epistemological difference between genesis and validity; and the difference between these two and the question about historical and conceptual sedimentations that often become graspable only once these are misplaced.
- <sup>25</sup> Neil Larsen has zoned in on Schwarz's formulation and juxtaposed it critically to Spivak's own formulation of the same problem in ways that neatly capture the fundamental differences involved: "The problem of catachresis – of imitation, of 'misplaced ideas' – is a false one, and yet its very falsity obeys a social and historical necessity. The solution to such a necessarily false problem cannot be to solve it on its own (false) terms; but nor can it be to reject the problem out of hand, as if it were merely the result of a chance mistake or a lapse of consciousness. ... True, there is no illusion here as to the possibility of solving the catachresis puzzle qua puzzle, whether through a neo-third-worldist cultural essentialism or a surrender to Eurocentric 'universals.' ... The uncritical turn here is not, to repeat, the pointing out of a historical inadequation of concepts, but the stubbornly and rather conventionally literary-formalist failure to attribute this inadequation to historical



and social factors themselves, as if its explanation could only be sought in the abstract, forma content of the concepts or 'concept-metaphors,' or in their discursively structured field" (2001, pp. 80–81).

<sup>26</sup> In his essay "Lyric Poetry and Society," Adorno similarly warns about reductive sociological analysis; insisting on the need to avoid usurping the place of experience of works of arts (which could also be argued vis-à-vis concepts); and forcefully argues about how social concepts can never be applied from without but rather must be applied through an immanent critique in close proximity with their objects; and how the social content of a work is frequently that which does not "follow the existing conditions of the time" (Adorno, 1991).

<sup>27</sup> These enabling conditions frequently allowed for the articulation of the historical experiences and perspectives of the colonized. Think, for instance, of the chronicles of Domingo Chimalpahin (2001) and the way this chronicler recycles and reconfigures terms from Náhuatl, which belonged to a pre-Hispanic cosmology, to interpret the unprecedented power that the Spanish king holds as head of the 16th-century Iberian monarchy; or how in colonial Perú the classical motifs and figures forged in the Renaissance worked to make intelligible a complex process that encompassed the conquest, its violence and enmity, and the persistence opacity, non-identity, and defining non-synchronous encounters, respectively (Gruzinski, 2010, p. 34; MacCormack, 2007).

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